

REVIEW ESSAY

Engulfed by the Past History and Experience at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

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Our trip to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) in Springfield, Illinois, began familiarly enough.¹ As a historian married to a former high school history teacher, I have grown accustomed to the need to preempt the boredom that afflicts our six- and four-year-old daughters each time we drag them to historic sites and events. I herded the children up to the first display, a timeline of events in flowing script, and searched for something—anything—that might draw them into the story. I spied a reference to young Abe's being kicked in the head by a horse, but before I could launch into the tale, my oldest

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¹The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum occupy two city blocks at 212 North Sixth St., Springfield, IL 62701, <http://www.alplm.org>.



The Museum Plaza

This central area juxtaposes young Abe reading in front of his boyhood cabin with the Lincoln family at the White House.

Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

poked her head *out* of the nearby life-sized reconstruction of the Lincoln family's Indiana cabin and yelled, "Hey, come in here."

The transition from looking *at* text on the wall to stepping *into* the cabin foreshadows the visitor experience at the Lincoln Museum. The \$90 million facility, which opened to the public on April 19, 2005, engulfs its visitors in a sophisticated, twenty-first-century rendition of Lincoln's world. While the overall effect has laid the museum open to controversy, our family's visit suggests to me that the ALPLM succeeds in informing and inspiring a broad public audience.

An open plaza greets visitors, offering central access to the theaters, 40,000 square feet of permanent exhibition spaces, café, gift shop, and exploration room for children. This design allows families to alternate forays into the exhibits and shows with stops for the kids at the restrooms and in a play area named "Mrs. Lincoln's Attic" that features dress-up clothes, pioneer toys, a dollhouse patterned after the Lincoln Home in Springfield, and, of course, Lincoln Logs.

The permanent exhibition space consists of three major galleries. *Journey One: The Pre-Presidential Years* presents Lincoln's life from Indiana, through New Salem and Springfield, to his departure for Washington. In *Journey Two: The White House Years*, visitors find depictions of the Civil War, national politics, Washington society, the Lincolns' family life, and the assassination and funeral procession. In contrast to these narrative galleries, the *Treasures Gallery* evokes a dis-

tinctly worshipful mood. Having completed the two historical “journeys,” visiting pilgrims enter the museum’s holy of holies to gaze upon a small collection of the Lincoln family’s personal belongings, including Abe’s shaving mirror, Mary’s wedding dress, Tad’s toy cannon, and the family’s dishes. A twenty-five-foot-high shimmering gold partition further demarcates the center of the gallery as an inner sanctum that guards a signed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation, the handwritten “Everett” copy of the Gettysburg Address, and the leather portfolio in which the president carried his papers.

The ALPLM has received much attention for its technological innovations (in the museum’s words, “combining traditional scholarship with twenty-first-century showmanship”).² The State of Illinois hired California-based BRC Imagination Arts—the designer of attractions for clients including the Henry Ford Museum, NASA, and Walt Disney’s Epcot Center—to overturn traditional museum expectations by creating an “immersive,” “experience-based attraction.”³ It is this blend of history with technology that has dominated public discussions of the museum, for critics and fans alike. The Union Theater, for example, presents an eighteen-minute film about “Lincoln’s Eyes” in which portrait painter Richard Doyle suggests reasons for the joy, sadness, and weariness visible in photographs of the president’s face. As a barrage of images flash in rapid succession across three wrap-around screens, the seats shake, the surround-sound rumbles, and cannons emit smoke. Across the plaza in the Holavision Theater, the nine-minute “Ghosts of the Library” production combines a live actor with physical props and digital technology to depict a historian who first imagines the people whose lives are recorded in the documents, then dreams of meeting and touching Lincoln, and then finally disappears in a revelation that he actually died at Vicksburg and is himself only imagined by the audience. After surviving cannon

²David LaGesse, “Honest Abe, Flesh and Blood,” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 14, 2005; Bob Thompson, “Histrionics And History: Lincoln Library’s High-Tech Exhibits Have Scholars Choosing Sides,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 2005; Cheryl Corley, “Lincoln Museum Goes High-Tech with History,” *National Public Radio*, Morning Edition, April 1, 2005; Jayne Clark, “Lincoln’s Spirit Lives in New Museum,” *USA Today*, April 19, 2005; Edward Rothstein, “Strumming the Mystic Chords of Memory,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2005; Kristin Klobberdanz, “Reimagining Abe,” *Time*, April 25, 2005.

³The BRC Imagination Arts web page may be found at <http://www.brcweb.com>. For their promotion of the ALPLM see Scott Ault, “It’s Showtime, Mr. President,” *Fun World*, February 2003 (at <http://www.funworldmagazine.com>) and Jeff Rosen, “Rewriting History,” *Attractions Management*, Jan 2004 (at <http://www.attractionsmanagement.com>).

fire and nearly touching Lincoln, my daughters were far less impressed by the "Ask Mr. Lincoln" display, in which pre-recorded children's voices pose questions that are answered on a pre-recorded video screen—how quickly they had become socialized to the immersive experience!

Even before the museum opened to the public, some critics had already disparaged it, media displays and all, with the dismissive D-word (Disney).⁴ In fact, however, the technological elements are clearly demarcated from the historical. The glitziest productions appear outside of the exhibition galleries in the theaters, and those technological features that do appear within the galleries remain physically separated from other exhibit items. For example, a wonderful digital map which traces Civil War troop movements and battles at a pace of one week per second to illustrate "The Civil War in Four Minutes" sits high on the wall, clearly separated from the soldiers' uniforms below. Similarly, visitors leave the flow of *Journey One* to enter a small twenty-first-century television control room in which Tim Russert reports the issues of the campaign of 1860 by presenting brief, clever, and visually engaging campaign ads to illustrate those complex issues much more effectively than written text. For our part, the only time we felt as if we were at Disneyland was while in line for the "Ghosts of the Library" show, where, after standing for several minutes in dim light with dozens of strangers, we were startled by the blare of televisions advertising the Presidential Library across the street.⁵

While the digital technology dazzles, visitors may find themselves more moved by the innovative application of such "old-fashioned" media as mannequins, murals, and multi-sensory displays. Fourteen of

⁴Historian John Simon and architectural critic Blair Kamin made the charge. "John Y. Simon: Sober Grants and Rubber Lincolns," *Civil War Talk Radio*, December 17, 2004; Blair Kamin, "Lincoln Land," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 2005. Art historian John R. Decker and historian Myron Marty respond. John R. Decker, "Review of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 3 (Dec 2005); Myron Marty, "Review of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum," *The Public Historian: A Journal of Public History* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2006), 185-89. For a thoughtful analysis of the relationship between media, museums, and history see Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

⁵I should disclose that I had already received a personal tour of the Presidential Library the previous day. Jenny Ericson showed me firsthand the super-secret vault, Abe's canes, Mary's dress, dozens of Lincoln broadsides and artwork, eight miles of moveable stacks, and conservation and microfilm rooms. The library's impressive collections are showcased in Richard Carwardine, "Abraham Lincoln's Library," *History Today* 53, no. 2 (February 2003).



The Slave Auction

Varied lighting, bright color, and dramatic action characterize the museum's many dioramas.

Courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

the twenty-nine focus points in the two journey exhibitions feature life-sized fiberglass figures with silicone skin and a mix of synthetic and real hair. A wonderful advance over the traditional wax-featured, moth-eaten mannequins, the subjects of these brightly colored dioramas pose in mid-action—John Wilkes Booth stealthily reaches for the door into the box at Ford's Theater, and Willie and Tad play baseball with an inkwell and broom in their father's law office.⁶ Most are visible from two or three sides, and my six-year-old daughter walked around the diorama of a New Orleans slave auction to a point from which she could see the face of the Simon Legree-like purchaser who is wrenching a man away from his wife and crying child. Looking into his eyes she announced, "He looks evil!"

⁶These are the "rubber Lincolns" which John Y. Simon did not see but nevertheless so notably named. "John Y. Simon: Sober Grants and Rubber Lincolns."

Several colorful and richly detailed murals punctuate the journey. In the Gettysburg room I found my four-year-old entranced by the eight-foot-tall, forty-two-foot-wide concave mural—a throwback to that earliest of “immersive” technologies, the late nineteenth-century cyclorama. Elsewhere, a mural depicting Lincoln’s departure from Springfield is carefully positioned behind life-sized cutouts of human shapes, over whose shoulders or under whose arms one must strain to catch a glimpse of the departing president-elect.

From first step to last, the exhibition galleries present an engulfing combination of multi-sensory stimuli. Bright colors carry the eye from one display to the next. Cheerful lighting illuminates the goods for sale in Lincoln’s New Salem store, while variations of dimness enshroud Willie on his deathbed and Abraham in his casket. Music, laughing, snoring, rain drops, and shouting voices fill one’s ears, while a blast of heat greets visitors in the White House kitchen and a cold chill slithers through the open window into which a mourning mother Mary stares. Visitors may finger the cold steel of slave shackles as well as the deepening lines of age and stress in copies of castings of Lincoln’s face made in 1861 and 1865. In the “Hall of Whispers” visitors find mocking political cartoons in warped picture frames, accented by slanted light and whispering voices of criticism. The experience brings to mind Lincoln’s reply when asked why he read aloud: “When I read aloud two senses catch the idea: first, I see what I read; second, I hear it, and therefore I can remember it better.”⁷

The multi-sensory exhibits also evoke great pathos. Eavesdropping on Abe and Mary in Willie’s bedroom one cannot help but empathize with the first couple over the impending loss of their second child. Gazing at Lincoln’s casket lying in state in the cavernous, ninety-five-percent-scale recreation of the House Chamber of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, we were so swept away by the torch-lit atmosphere and somber strains of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” that my wife responded to our four-year-old’s excited description of another exhibit with, “Shhh. You must be reverent.”

Hoosiers wondering how their pioneer boy has been treated in this Illinois museum can rest assured; while Lincoln’s native Kentucky

⁷William H. Herndon and Jessie W. Weik, *Herndon’s Lincoln*, edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 207.

receives almost no coverage, Indiana appears prominently. Entering the central plaza visitors see a full-scale reproduction of Thomas Lincoln's Indiana cabin juxtaposed with a one-third-scale recreation of the south portico of the White House. Abe's flatboat journey from Rockport in 1828 launches the visitor into the first gallery, and the first loud crack heard (and felt) in the Union Theater production depicts Abe's early horse-kick. Beginning in his own lifetime with campaign literature suggesting that any boy could become president, Lincoln's boyhood has served as a foil for his presidential greatness. Yet in this museum one finds neither the "putrid pool" of William Herndon's early biography, nor the chest-pounding pride of some early twentieth-century Hoosiers.⁸ If the ALPLM makes any interpretation of Lincoln's Indiana years, it does so by selective isolation. Here we meet a solitary boy who reads on a stump or alone by a fire. His father is not shiftless or lazy, he is simply absent. Nancy's death is merely mentioned, and Abe tells no jokes because there are no neighbors to listen. The scholarship of the past thirty years, which has turned to Lincoln's boyhood in search of the roots of his "inner world" psyche, his "romantic cultural politics," and his public and private virtues, remains unengaged.⁹

As a historian, I note that some observers have identified anachronisms, from the modernizing of the words of John Wilkes Booth and Frederick Douglass, to the substitution of a U.S. flag for that of the Illinois 33rd Regiment, to the closing (wisely done) of Lincoln's casket.¹⁰ In some instances, the process of historical analysis is engaged only superficially: the painter narrating "Lincoln's Eyes," for example, brushes off the question of Abe and Mary's troubled marriage with a wink and the wisecrack that "they had four kids so there must have been something there." The detective-like historian in the "Ghosts of the Library" presentation finds a diary that literally comes to life and

⁸Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, 4; Indiana Lincoln Union, *Lincoln the Hoosier: A Restatement of Some Facts that Too Many Folks Seem to Have Forgotten* (Indianapolis, 1927).

⁹Thomas is not technically absent, for he is sleeping in the cabin, and he and Nancy are pictured in the children's play area. Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana, Ill., 1994); Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb, Ill., 2003); William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York, 2002). For a brief assessment of the museum's selective isolation of Lincoln's record on race see Christi Parsons and Ray Long, "Museum Pulls No Punches," *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 2005.

¹⁰Ray Long, "What would Honest Abe say?" *Chicago Tribune*, April 14, 2005; Thompson, "Histronics and History"; Kamin, "Lincoln Land."

tells its own story without any need for verification, corroboration, or analysis.

As a reviewer, I cannot help but notice the impact of the museum on visitors, on the community, and on the history-museum world in general. Six months after opening, the ALPLM welcomed its 400,000th visitor, and the 1,000,000th passed through the doors in January 2007. Our visit in October 2006 allowed us to attend the 10,000th showing of the "Ghosts of the Library" production. Springfield businesses have reported a rise in revenues and local planners are working to turn the museum's success to the service of a thorough downtown revitalization. Contrary to early predictions, more people are visiting the Lincoln historic sites in Springfield, as well as in nearby New Salem and Decatur.¹¹ From a collecting standpoint, the museum's opening prompted important artifact donations: Lincoln's leather attaché, the wedding necklace he gave Mary, and a survey he performed in New Salem.¹² Most tellingly, success in Springfield has prompted the directors of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate to follow suit (and, in the process, to earn their first D-word from the historical critics).¹³

Finally, as a father, I left the museum extremely pleased. Our four-year-old liked "everything," and the oldest asked if we could live there and sleep in the log house. One month later, I mentioned to them my work on this review; their eyes immediately lit up as detailed memories poured out to engulf us once more in the museum's world. I mentioned the slave auction diorama and the oldest described the family's pain, the purchaser's face, the steel shackles on the wall, the photograph of a whipped slave's lacerated back. As I listened to her recollections I thought about Abe, reading aloud and "remembering better."

¹¹Tim Landis and Natalie Morris, "Tourism Booming," [Springfield, Ill.] *State Journal-Register*, July 21, 2005; James Krohe, Jr., "Old Abe Causes Stir," *Planning* (December 2005), 48-49; Marty, "Review of the ALPLM," 188. John Simon and Harold Holzer both expressed concerns that people would forgo visiting the authentic sites in favor of the museum. "John Y. Simon: Sober Grants and Rubber Lincolns"; Patrick T. Reardon, "A New Focus on Lincoln's Story," *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 2005.

¹²Miriam Di Nunzio, "Lincoln Legacy," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 21, 2005.

¹³The influence of the ALPLM is noted in Nathan Thornburgh, "History Goes Hollywood," *Time*, September 18, 2006, 64-65; "Mount Vernon Provides New Look at George Washington," *CNN.com*, November 15, 2006. Philip Kennicott, "Additions Give Mount Vernon The Feel of Yesterdayland," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2006.